

THE SENG ZE VILLAGE *MA NI*

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ABSTRACT

Local residents believe Seng ze Ma Ni in Khams has the largest number of *ma Ni* stones in a single location anywhere in the world. Certain accounts, sacred objects, and ceremonies associated with the Ma Ni and an interview with a resident, provide insight into its historical importance as a focus of pilgrimage and trade. Local beliefs and statements reveal the significance of the Ma Ni with regard to local notions of territoriality.

KEY WORDS

Seng ze Ma Ni, Khams, *ma Ni* stones, Yul shul, Yushu, Qinghai

## INTRODUCTION

Rgya nag Ma Ni is located in Seng ze Village, Skye dgu Township, Yul shul County, Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon Province, PR China. Local residents believe the Seng ze Ma Ni in Khams contains the largest concentration of *ma Ni* stones to be found in a single location anywhere in the world.<sup>1</sup> Certain accounts, sacred objects, and ceremonies associated with the Ma Ni, and an interview with a resident are presented, providing insight into its historical importance as a focus of pilgrimage and trade. Local beliefs and statements also reveal the significance of the Ma Ni with regard to local notions of territoriality.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2004, Seng ze Village received a certificate from the *Shanghai Great World Guinness Book of Records* attesting to the Ma Ni being the largest *ma Ni* pile in the world, although such certification is questionable. As *Beijing Newspeak* reports: "The 'Shanghai Great World Guinness Book of Records' has been confusing the media and the public for years. As the Xinhua article explains, Guinness' official representative in China is Liaoning Education Press which has been 'the real Guinness Book of Records representative in China since Shanghai Great World Guinness and the Guinness Book of Records split in 1996.' When the two organisations parted, the Shanghai office changed the 'Guinness' part of its name from ji (1st tone) ni (2nd tone) si (1st tone) to ji (2nd tone) ni (2nd) si (1st)—i.e., a different first character with a slightly different pronunciation (*sic*)" (<http://www.beijingnewspeak.com/2007/10/30/guinness-confusion-continues-for-chinas-aspiring-record-breakers/> accessed 16 August 2008).

## ACCOUNTS OF THE RGYA NAG<sup>2</sup> INCARNATE LAMA

Rgya nag 'China' derives from local accounts that say the incarnate lama who established the Ma Ni traveled in inner China before coming to and settling in Seng ze.

Locals believe that Rgya nag rtogs ldan byang chub 'phags dbang was born in Chab mdo approximately three centuries ago and eventually set out to find a place where he could, as an incarnate lama, develop Buddhism, and help sentient beings find enlightenment. His subsequent travels took him to numerous Tibetan areas and to India. Finally, he came to Seng ze and established the Ma Ni. The seventh incarnation of the lama died in 1994 and three years later, a local one-year-old boy was recognized as the successor. The following three accounts about the first incarnation are still heard today.

### *Flying Across the Yangtze River*<sup>3</sup>

When the lama reached the banks of the Yangtze River (which originates in Yul shul, along with the Mekong and Yellow Rivers) he asked local boatmen to help him cross. They were busy harvesting barley and ignored him. Rtogs ldan grew tired of waiting, unfurled his shawl, and flew across the river. Two boatmen saw him in flight and concluded that he must be a great saint and invited him to cross the river in their boat whenever he chose. Rtogs ldan told the boatmen that they should assist impoverished people and not charge them to cross

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<sup>2</sup> Rgya nag refers to 'China' and Han Chinese inhabited areas.

<sup>3</sup> Told to Dkon mchog dge legs by his mother, Skal yag (b. 1947), in Seng ze Village in the 1980s.

the river if they could not pay. The boatmen agreed. This explains why Tibetan Yangtze River boatmen historically did not charge people who could not pay to cross the river.

### *Bringing a Horse Back to Life*<sup>4</sup>

When Rtogs ldan was travelling in Sichuan, he noticed a young man sobbing because his beloved horse had died. Sympathizing with the young man, Rtogs ldan put his prayer wheel on the dead steed's head, and melodiously chanted *aoM ma Ni pad + me h'uM*. The horse revived. This prayer wheel is called 'Do ba ro rtseng 'khor lo (horse reviving prayer wheel) and was used in Thub bstan Monastery, Khri 'du County in Yul shul Prefecture in 2008.

### *Tossing Tea*<sup>5</sup>

Rtogs ldan traveled to Emei Mountain in Sichuan, came to Lcags la rgyal bo's<sup>6</sup> territory, and raised a scripture flag (Buddhist scriptures printed on cloth or banners) before the palace of the local king, Lcags la. Lcags la noticed the scripture flag and angrily demanded to know who had put it up. When he learned that the responsible party was a monk, he

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<sup>4</sup> Dkon mchog dge legs recounted this account based on Seng ze villagers' stories that he has heard. See A mye chos grags et al. (1990, 31-32) for a very similar account.

<sup>5</sup> Told to Dkon mchog dge legs by Skal yag in Seng ze Village in the 1980s.

<sup>6</sup> Lcags la rgyal bo was a local king in the vicinity of Dar rtse mdo.

ordered his subordinates to bring the monk to him. After Rtogs ldan was found, his hands were smaller than the handcuffs. When still smaller handcuffs were tried, they suddenly disintegrated. When the king was informed of this, he wished to test Rtogs ldan. He told him to throw, at the same time, sixteen tea bricks on top of the palace. Instead, Rtogs ldan threw them so far away that it required one day by horse to find them.

## SACRED OBJECTS

In addition to accounts of Rtogs ldan's miracles that attest to his saintliness, there are also sacred relics kept in Seng ze Temple that are attributed to him. These included, in 2008, a rock with his handprint, a rock with his footprint, two stones upon which Rtogs ldan carved *ma Ni* with his finger, a stone that he squeezed, a talking *thang ka*, and a talking Buddha image.

We now describe several of these venerated relics.

### *The Talking Thang ka*<sup>7</sup>

The *thang ka zhal grags* 'talking *thang ka*', is said to have come from 'gro mgon chos rgyal 'phags pa, the well-known Yuan Dynasty tutor, who presented it to Skal bzang Monastery in Khri 'du County and predicted that a man would come to fetch it in the future. When Rtogs ldan visited Skal bzang Monastery many years later he saw the *thang ka zhal*

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<sup>7</sup> Told to Dkon mchog dge legs by his father, Bsam yag (b. 1947), in Seng ze Village in the 1980s. For a color photograph of this *thang ka*, see Byang chub (1991, 58).

*grags* and asked for it. The monastery refused. As Rtogs ldan was leaving the monastery the *thang ka* suddenly said, "Don't leave me! You are my real master!" This greatly shocked the monks. The monastery then gave it to him and he brought it to Seng ze.

### *Stones*<sup>8</sup>

When Seng ze Villagers and Rtogs ldan began to dig for white stones upon which to carve *ma Ni*, Rtogs ldan drunkenly danced and sang. Villagers said, "Rtogs ldan has become crazy."

Rtogs ldan said, "Today, I indulge in drunkenness and madness," picked up a white stone, squeezed it into various shapes, and finally twisted it into a spiral. Next, he set the imprints of his hand and his foot on separate stones. He also picked up three black rocks, and on the third wrote *aoM ma Ni pad+me h'uM* with his finger. His purpose was to convince people of his powers so that he could easily establish the Seng ze Ma Ni.

## RITUAL AND FESTIVAL

A dance related to the Ma Ni that is performed only in Seng ze Village is described, as are two festivals.

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<sup>8</sup> Dkon mchog dge legs offers this account based on Seng ze villagers' stories that he has heard. See A mye chos grags et al. (1990, 86) for a very similar account.

*Seng ze chos bro*

Seng ze chos bro refers to a dance performed only by men. Its origin is attributed to Rtogs ldan and its connection to Seng ze Ma Ni is obvious. Dancers are divided into two groups. The two groups sing antiphonally while dancing. An example of a verse follows:

<sup>1</sup>དཔོན་པོ་དབང་ཐང་ཆེ་བྱུང་།

<sup>2</sup>འོག་སྤྲེལ་གྲག་རག་ཆེ་བྱུང་།

<sup>3</sup>དཔལ་ལྷན་དོན་འགྲུབ་གླིང་ལ་མཐུ་དང་རྣམ་པ་ཆེ་བྱུང་།

<sup>4</sup>གནས་ཆེན་མ་ཁི་རང་བྱོན་རྒྱལ་པོ་དངོས་གྲུབ་ཆེ་བྱུང་།

<sup>5</sup>རྒྱལ་རི་ལྷག་པ་གཡུ་གཙུག་སྐྱུར་མཁྱོགས་དྲག་ཅུ་ལ་ཆེ་བྱུང་།

<sup>1</sup>The leader achieved great power,

<sup>2</sup>Common people acquired prosperity.

<sup>3</sup>Dpal ldan don 'grub gling (Skye dgu Monastery) gained  
magical power and ability.

<sup>4</sup>This sacred place of self-originated *ma Ni* stones bestows  
blessings and accomplishment.

<sup>5</sup>Rgyab ri shug pa g.yu gtsug (a local mountain god) gained  
overwhelming power.

The songs are characterized by solemn, long-drawn-out syllables and the dance movements match this in being slow and graceful.

*Festivals*

On the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the twelfth and first lunar months, several thousand Tibetans from Yul shul, Ser shul, Rma stod, and Chab mdo arrive in Seng ze Village, circumambulate the Ma Ni, and purchase *ma Ni* stones that they then add to the ever-growing pile. The actual festival begins on the tenth and the number of visitors increases in

the following five days. The fourteenth and fifteenth days are the peak of the festival. On the fifteenth day, the monks of Skye dgu Monastery conduct a public empowerment ritual; however, the role of this *ma Ni* festival has changed since a new religious gathering was initiated in December 1999.

In Seng ze Village on the tenth to fifteenth days of the eleventh lunar month of 1999, Skye dgu Monastery held a grand religious activity—Sa skya'i smon lam chen mo 'Sa skya Sect Great Prayer Meeting'. This was the first time it had been held and it has since continued annually. Skye dgu Monastery is both organizer and host while Seng ze Village assists by providing such public facilities as temples, water, and electricity. The number of people attending the ritual has steadily increased since the festival's inception.

In 2004, approximately fifty lamas and 5,000 monks from monasteries in Yul shul, Dkar mdzes Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan, and the Tibet Autonomous Region participated in this gathering. Most monks represented their own monasteries and came to Seng ze with their own group of monks. Certain individual monk pilgrims happened to be in the area at the time and also participated. Each monk participant received thirty RMB a day on average as well as three hearty meals daily during the gathering.

In 1999, approximately 1,000 nuns attended, but they were excluded from participating in the formal chanting, because Skye dgu Monastery had not made arrangements for nuns, which meant that they also received no payment. In subsequent years, nuns did participate. From 50,000-100,000 people from throughout Yul shul Prefecture and such adjacent areas as Chab mdo and the northwest part of Dkar mdzes Prefecture also attended and participated in the chanting and circumambulation of the Ma Ni.

After Skye dgu Monastery began holding the great prayer meeting annually in the eleventh lunar month, the



number of visitors to the original Seng ze Ma Ni festival has dramatically decreased on the tenth to fifteenth days of the twelfth and first lunar months because many people only come once a year to attend the Ma Ni Meeting, and to shop.

Bzang spyod<sup>9</sup> and mtshan brjod<sup>10</sup> are chanted repeatedly throughout five days. A participating monk said that in 2006, Skye dgu Monastery provided three meals a day to all monk and nun participants that included *rtsam pa* and bread for breakfast; rice cooked with butter, jujubes, and raisins for lunch; and bread for a late afternoon meal, as well as a cash payment to each monk and nun. He reported that he received 170 RMB in five days. Nuns attended in a separate temple and also received payment and meals. The total participating monks and nuns numbered from 5,000 to 7,000 and represented Sa skya, Dge lugs, Bka' rgyud, and Rnying ma sects of Tibetan Buddhism.

The organizer also gives a gift to each participating monk and nun. Gifts vary from year to year. For example, bags, watches, and T-shirts inscribed with the name of the prayer meeting, Buddhist scripture books, and Buddha statues may be given.

Responding to the needs of the increasing number of participants, Skye dgu Monastery built a large open-roof hall in 2006 that can accommodate approximately 10,000 participants. The prayer meeting is not only for religious purposes; it also brings sizable profits to the organizer. A local monk stated that Skye dgu Monastery earned 200,000 to 300,000 RMB in 2006 through the prayer meeting, after deducting the costs of meals, payment, and other expenses.

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<sup>9</sup> Bzang spyod is a prayer scripture promoting a universal wish to bring happiness to all beings.

<sup>10</sup> Mtshan brjod is a recitation of names of the Buddha, Boddhisattvas, and deities.

## CONCULSION

To begin the final portion of this paper, we present a portion of an edited interview with a Seng ze resident born in the 1940s:

During my early childhood in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the *ma Ni* festival in Seng ze attracted several thousand Tibetans. They circumambulated the Ma Ni and purchased *ma Ni* stones which they then put on the Ma Ni.

Every village home had several small rooms for guests. Each room had a window and a door. No money was charged for accommodation. Families hoped that guests would purchase *ma Ni* stones from them and also introduce more customers to them.

The village's ability to accommodate guests was limited. Many people camped in nearby fields and near a river by the village. Yaks and horses brought by the visitors surrounded what was a large temporary camp. The yaks were used for transporting, for example, purchased *ma Ni* stones. Many nomads had no money so they exchanged animals or animal products for *ma Ni* stones.

People seized this public occasion to wear and exhibit splendid personal clothing. It was one of the few annual occasions for a huge crowd to gather in this vast, sparsely populated area.

As devotees chanted melodiously along the circumambulation route, nearby, along the road that ran by the village, a bustling market emanated a merry clamor of endless bargaining. Products offered included leather boots, clothing, incense, fruit from India and Lhasa, tea and rice from Sichuan, and dried noodles and jujubes from Zi ling

(Xining). Local products included wood kegs, knives, saddles, and salt.

This was an important trade opportunity for farmers and nomads. Both had plans for their families' annual food requirements, and consequently there was an abundant exchange of barley, butter, meat, and livestock.

A huge crowd gathered in our village. We were very excited whereas the nomad children were timid and cautious. We joyously crossed in and out of the crowd, market, and nomad camps as dogs ran about. Our parents encouraged us to take care of 'our little herdsmen friends'. We were very proud to take the nomad boys into the crowd and explain and show them what was what.

Some village boys played pranks on nomad girls. They put small stones on prayer wheels. When the girls rotated the wheels in the course of their circumambulations the small stones flew off and hit their heads.

Although farmers verbally deprecated herdsmen as '*brog rgog* 'country bumpkins', there was a relationship between the two based on trust, mutual gift-giving, and annual visits. Both farmers and herdsmen were proud to have friends in communities not their own.

The dimensions of this relationship were largely determined by economic relationships that allowed herdsmen to obtain barley and farmers to obtain butter and meat. A normal farmer's family needed to have a herdsman friend. If a farming family did not have a herdsmen friend, villagers thought he was incapable—it seemed as though this family had no men.

In late fall and early winter, villagers took barley to exchange for butter and livestock in

herding areas. Herdsmen gave sheep and yaks in return.

Villagers also tried to find more *ma Ni* customers. If they were successful, they made an oral contract. Payment for *ma Ni* was mostly in yaks.

The more nomad friends one had, the more benefits one received and villagers tried their best to contact as many nomads as possible. This was frequently difficult. Young men who went to herding areas the first time braved strong wind and snow and discovered the extent of their immature social skills. It was an unforgettable experience. This was an important part of the process of boys becoming men.

When villagers returned home with yaks, butter, and sheep, the animals were slaughtered for winter food. My family consumed at least ten yaks and fifteen sheep per winter. The total number of slaughtered animals was astounding. One particular village household slaughtered sixty to seventy yaks every winter and most of these animals were obtained through the *ma Ni* trade. This slaughtering was controversial because herdsmen paid living animals for *ma Ni* and then the *ma Ni*-makers killed the animals.

Why did the herdsmen barter yaks for *ma Ni* stones? They might have wanted to add *ma Ni* stones to the ever-growing *ma Ni* as a post-death ritual in order to better a dead relative's spiritual welfare.

Despite lamas' protests, the livestock-for-*ma Ni* business continued. The farmers said, "Herdsmen are stupid. Why would they trade livestock for *ma Ni* stones?"

The herdsmen always answered, "It is a question of purity of heart."

*Ma Ni* carving was not confined to trade, for carving *ma Ni* on boulders was a common post-death activity. When my paternal grandfather died in the 1950s, my father and his brothers carved innumerable *ma Ni* on cliffs near our village. All summer they camped in a deep gorge, rose when the sun did, and worked until the sun set. Their clothes were worn out from scrambling on the cliffs and their hands were calloused from months of stone carving. They carved both large and small *ma Ni*.

In time, the memory of Grandfather faded and the lives of Father and his brothers returned to normal but the *ma Ni* deep in the stones of the cliffs are everlasting, though the passage of time may cover them with lichens. And I can still hear the gorge echoing with the sound of stones being carved as images of my father and uncles flash before my eyes.

This account suggests an idea shared both by residents of Seng ze Village and other Tibetans—the presence of the *Ma Ni* confers upon Seng ze Village a religious importance not found in any other location in Mtsho sngon. The very large number of *ma Ni* stones concentrated in Seng ze Village and the sacred objects associated with the founder of the *Ma Ni* combine to create an attractive pilgrimage site. Purchasing *ma Ni* stones in the village, adding them to the *Ma Ni*, and circumambulating the *Ma Ni* are considered helpful for one's karma. Furthermore, the unique dance and songs performed by Seng ze villagers during the lunar New Year period are also related to the *Ma Ni* and provide unique entertainment, which further attracts visitors.

Seng ze dance is renowned. Seng ze villagers historically kept the words of the accompanying song absolutely secret because they did not want outsiders to

learn them. To this end, when two teams danced and sang, each team would begin singing before the other team finished, thus it was virtually impossible for spectators to understand the words.

The *ma Ni* trade—*ma Ni* stones for livestock and butter—was an important moment for trade and interaction between farmers and nomads at Seng ze. While sharing devotion to the idea of the importance of the Ma Ni, both parties obtained needed food items. While each side benefited from this, at the same time, stereotypes related to the farmer-herdsman dichotomy were reinforced.

Seng ze villagers are very proud of the Ma Ni. They derive a unique sense of territorial identity from the village having been chosen by Rgya nag rtogs ldan. They believe that the Ma Ni is of such religious significance that it is unnecessary to visit other religious pilgrimage sites. This reverence for the Ma Ni is evident each morning as most middle-aged and older village residents circumambulate before beginning the day's activities. During the New Year period of village performances related to the Ma Ni, many buses shuttle between Seng ze Village and Skye dgu with pilgrims.

As the home of Chief Grwa bu, the most powerful leader in Yul shul in the 1940s and 1950s, Seng ze Village was also an important political site. This combination of political significance with the historical economic activity associated with trading opportunities created by the large number of pilgrims to the Ma Ni further added importance to Seng ze.

With the rapid growth of Skye dgu as the political and economic center of Yul shul Prefecture, only the religious importance of Seng ze Village remains, and remain it does, as the thousands of pilgrims who visit during the Tibetan New Year period testifies.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>11</sup> See Note at the end for more information on this publication.

## NOTE

According to this printed version, the three main parts of this work were written at different times. Part I was written in a Wood Sheep year (Gregorian equivalent unknown), Part II was written in the Wood Horse year of the sixteenth sixty year cycle of the Tibetan Calendar (1954), and Part III was written in 1990. However, oral interviews with knowledgeable Seng ze villagers suggest that the original copy of Rtogs ldan's biography (Part I) was lent to a lama from 'bri stod County, Yul shul, at some unknown date and was never returned. Lama Ri ho from Skye dgu Monastery wrote the Rtogs ldan biography cited above, which the Seng ze Village Committee had carved on woodblocks. Dates for Lama Ri ho's birth and death and the age of the aforementioned wood blocks are unknown.

Part I is, as the title states, a biography of Rgya nag rtogs ldan byang chub 'phags dbang.

Part II describes the size of the Ma Ni, the various sorts and quantity of objects comprising the Ma Ni, the Ma Ni's benefits and functions, and rules for what may be carved on the *ma Ni* stones and what colors may be used on them.

Part III summarizes rebuilding the Ma Ni in the period 1986-1990, the Seng ze Village Committee's achievements related to religious revival in the village, and religious activities.

The appendix describes the importance of the publication of the work and lists numerous people who encouraged and supported Dbra rog bkra bzang and Bzang mkhan mkhan grub in their efforts to publish portions of this work in New Delhi in the Wood Ox year of the sixteenth sixty year cycle of the Tibetan Calendar (1985), based on the handwritten copy.



In 1990, Seng ze Village published the volume cited above at the Yul shul Prefecture Press, Skye dgu Town based on a machine-printed copy from India, with the exception of newly-added Part III. The volume cited above lists Seng ze Village Committee as the press, but this is incorrect for Seng ze Village had no press in 1990.

# NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Wiley	Tibetan	<i>Pinyin</i>	Chinese
Ma Ni	མ་ཎི།	Mani shi	玛尼石
Seng ze	སེང་ཟེ།	Xinzhai cun	新寨村
Khams	ཁམས།	Kang	康
Dkar mdzes	དཀར་མཛེས།	Ganzi	甘孜
Skye dgu	སྐྱེ་དགུ།	Jiegu	结古
Yul shul	ཡུལ་ཤུལ།	Yushu	玉树
Chab mdo	ཆབ་མདོ།	Changdu	昌都
Mtsho sngon	མཚོ་སྔོན།	Qinghai	青海
'bri chu	འབྲི་ཆུ།	Changjiang	长江
Rdza chu	རྩ་ཆུ།	Lancangjiang	澜沧江
Rma chu	རྩ་ཆུ།	Huanghe	黄河
Rgyal bo	རྒྱལ་བོ།	Tusi	土司
Glang chen	གླང་ཆེན་འབྲིང་རི།	Emei shan	峨眉山
'gying ri			
'bri stod	འབྲི་སྟོད།	Zhiduo	治多
Dar rtse mdo	དར་རྩེ་མདོ།	Kangding	康定
Yon rgyal rabs	ཡོན་རྒྱལ་རབས།	Yuan chao	元朝
Khri 'du	ཁྲི་འདུ།	Chengduo	称多
Rgya nag	རྒྱ་ནག།	Zhongguo	中国
Sprul sku	སྤྱུལ་སྤྱ།	Hufo	活佛
Zi ling	ཟི་ལིང་།	Xining	西宁
Yul shul khul	ཡུལ་ཤུལ་ཁུལ་པར་	Yushu zhou	玉树州
par skrun khang	ཤུན་ཁང་།	yinshua chang	印刷厂